

Exhibition October 9, 2024 – March 10, 2025

Sabatini Building, Floor 1

Esperpento

Popular art and aesthetic revolution



José Clemente Orozco, *El tirano* [The Tyrant], 1947. Archive of Museo de Arte Moderno. INBAL/Secretaría de Cultura. © Heirs of José Clemente Orozco, 2024

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In the first third of the 20th century, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936) formulated the concept of “*esperpento*” as a core of aesthetic thought for understanding reality from a perspective that required critical distance. Often synthesized in the metaphor of the concave mirror, *esperpento* crystallized a genuine form of the grotesque in which the deformed reflection of reality provoked a comic and satirical estrangement. The Spanish society of the time, dislocated and strongly anchored in the past, could only be put on stage with a puppeteer’s dexterity at turning the tables from beneath.

Valle-Inclán’s *esperpento* fed off procedures like distancing, animalization, or the conversion of characters into puppets. Besides incorporating popular formats like *romances de ciego* and *aleluyas* (stories in images), the satirical press, the early cinema, the theatrical revue, or the *bululú* (a comedian who performed plays by himself, changing his voice according to the characters), the writer’s full artistic program also connected with what was termed “the retheatricalization of the theatre”. In opposition to 19th-century realism, this trend attached greater importance to scenographic art and even altered the image of actresses and actors through masks and costumes that deformed or modified the human figure.

The set of materials selected for this exhibition covers a broad repertoire of disciplines, artworks, and documents that survey Valle-Inclán’s literary oeuvre and explore the potential of his proposals on the basis of the complex intersections between avant-garde, popular culture, and aesthetic revolution. The show begins by tracing a genealogy of *esperpento* through the relationship between device, vision, and corporality at the turn of the 20th century. Entitled *Before Esperpento*, the first section looks at some of the most outstanding satirical publications of the late 19th century, which are shown alongside a variety of optical apparatuses that were disseminated for popular entertainment. Although the roots of *esperpento* lie in the picaresque novel of the Golden Age and the work of Francisco de Goya (to whom the writer attributed the invention of *esperpentismo*), these other manifestations of 19th-century visual culture are read as a foretaste of the distortion and deformation that were to accompany the gestation of Valle-Inclán’s aesthetics.

EL MOTIN



Los loros del gobierno charlando, y los gansos de la mayoría aplaudiendo.

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Los loros del gobierno charlando, y los gansos de la mayoría aplaudiendo [The parrots of the government chatting, and the geese of the majority applauding], in *El Motín*, no. 24, 1886. Biblioteca Nacional de España



Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind I: The Farewells*, 1911. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979. Photo: 2024 digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

Midnight Vision, the next section, focuses on what was called “vision from the heights” at the start of the 20th century. The change of scale brought about by the Great War, the alteration of states of consciousness through the use of drugs, and the cosmovision proposed by spiritualism and theosophy are congregated here as experiences that marked the Galician author and his contemporaries. Works like Umberto Boccioni’s triptych *States of Mind* (1911) not only evidence cracks running through the whole concept of mimesis but also evoke the physiological and psychic transformations that the experience of modernity brought about in the society of its time.

Puppet Stage and *The Honor of Mr. Punch/Mardi Gras* bring together elements and literary forms from popular tradition to signal Valle-Inclán’s disgust towards the governing powers and a social situation marked by violence against the other. The first section gathers materials linked to the stage of the time that connect Valle-Inclán’s farces with the European trend of the “retheatricalization of theatre” and the puppets of the Italian Vittorio Podrecca, whose Teatro dei Piccoli was a fundamental



View of the puppets of Vittorio Podrecca's Teatro dei Piccoli in the exhibition, 2024.
Teatro Stabili del Friuli Venezia Giulia – Il Rossetti.

Photo: Museo Reina Sofía, Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores



Rosario de Velasco, *Mascarada* [Masquerade], 1973. Fundación La mirada ingenua, Benasque, Huesca. Photo: Javier Broto Hernando. Courtesy Diputación Provincial de Huesca

referent in the genesis of *esperpento*. In the second section, the context of the colonial wars and the trilogy *Martes de carnaval* (Mardi Gras, 1930) allows the popular energies of the Galician *entroido* festival, suggested by such multifarious works and artifacts as the paintings of Laxeiro and Rosario de Velasco or the masks that belonged to José Gutiérrez Solana, to be confronted with the supposed honor of the upper echelons of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.

Through different media like photography, collage, social painting, film, dance, or theatre, *Bohemian Lights* includes explicit references to the moment of social revolt and of the decline of bohemia that provides the setting for the Valle-Inclán's play after which this section is named (in Spanish: *Luces de bohemia*). The deforming gaze of the mirror at the bottom of the glass closes in on the death of an epoch and heralds the emergence of a new time that shifts the focus onto the collective and the choral, also represented in the confluence of voices in the next section, *Retables*. This is centered on a model of composition or visual narrative that was revived by artists and writers with the goal of social regeneration or aesthetic renewal. The retables of Valle-Inclán place the emphasis on the degradation of values and ties permeating every level of society. Instincts, sins, and passions are interlaced in polyphonic narratives imbued with a mixture of religiosity and popular tradition that subverts the logic of the ordinary world.

The final part of the exhibition revolves around the narrative *esperpentos* of Valle-Inclán, written in an international context of rising fascisms. The incarnation of *esperpento* in the figure of the tyrant summarizes the room devoted to *Tyrant Banderas*. Here, a work by José Clemente Orozco exemplifies the grotesque deformation of the political leader: the degradation of the hero, the decrepit body seething with cruelty and impotence, arrogance and fear. On the basis of a contemporary reading of the novel, the Mexican group Lagartijas tiradas al sol presents *No tengo por qué seguir soñando con los cadáveres que he visto* [I have no reason to carry on dreaming about the corpses I have seen, 2024], a scenic installation that tries to respond to those *esperpentos* whose cruelty and anachronism surpasses the ones created by literary imagination.



Xosé Conde Corbal, *Escena III: Taberna de Pica Lagartos* [Scene III: Tavern of Pica Lagartos], from the series *Luces de bohemia. Madrid absurdo, brillante y hambriento* [Bohemian Lights. Absurd, Brilliant and Hungry Madrid], 1966. Archive Familia Conde Escuredo.
Photo: Miguel Mosquera Conde



Views of the House and Museum of Tía Sandalia, c. 1938-1987. Casa-Museo Tía Sandalia. Ayuntamiento de Villacañas. Photo: Museo Reina Sofía, Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores

The exhibition closes with the section *The Iberian Arena*, a reference to Valle-Inclán's unfinished project for a cycle of novels entitled in Spanish *El ruedo ibérico*. As if the whole of the country's history took place in a giant bullring that concentrated violence, politics, and spectacle, the deformity of reality crystallizes all the tensions prior to the Spanish Civil War, which appears as a non-narrated conclusion to the development of *esperpento*. This final section houses a sound mosaic by Maricel Álvarez and Marcelo Martínez, *EL COSO* [The ARENA, 2024], based on *Cartel de ferias* (Fiesta Poster, the fifth book of the second novel of *The Iberian Arena*), where festivity and violence coincide in a scene that synthesizes many dimensions of *esperpento* and its narratives, and also of this exhibition.



Joaquim Martí-Bas, *Fusilamientos en la plaza de toros de Badajoz* [Executions at Badajoz Bullring], 1937. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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Opening hours

Monday to Saturday and
public holidays from
10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Sundays

from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Closed on Tuesdays

Exhibition rooms in all venues
will be cleared 15 minutes
before closing time

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